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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0206

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 003009

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR WALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/25/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV TH

SUBJECT: THAILAND: THAKSIN PULLS THE PLUG ON NEXT BIG RED RALLY

REF: A. BANGKOK 3003 (AMBASSADOR MEETS THAKSIN,S SISTER)
1B. BANGKOK 2931 (ABHISIT GOVT HAS LEGS REDS PLAN
NEXT RALLY)
1C. BANGKOK 974 (BANGKOK CALM SOME REDSHIRT LEADERS
ARRESTED)

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Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (SBU) Summary: Fugitive former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra used separate November 24 phone-ins to urge leaders of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), aka the "red-shirts," and the opposition Puea Thai party to stand down from a planned multi-day rally scheduled to begin on November 28 and last through at least December 2. Following Thaksin,s call-in, the actual cancellation by UDD leaders November 25 was little more than a formality. The cancellation temporarily lowered temperatures in a city that had been bracing itself for the largest red rally since April and the citywide invocation of the Internal Security Act. Red-shirt plans for a possible separate rally in Chiang Mai against PM Abhisit's anticipated November 29 visit there are covered septel from CG Chiang Mai.

12. (C) Comment: As reported in REF A and elsewhere, in recent days we had actively sought out Thaksin,s family members (sister Yingluck and ex-wife Pojamon) and core red-shirt leaders to urge them to denounce the extreme rhetoric that had recently emerged, and to disavow the use of violence going forward. Though Thaksin has artfully framed his decision to call off the rally as a function of his deep veneration of the King and a related desire to avoid detracting from the upcoming birthday celebrations December 2-7, we suspect the primary rationale for the decision to pull the plug was far more pragmatic. Faced with mounting evidence that the Abhisit government was not on the verge of imminent collapse, as well as the fact that the funds required to bring protesters to Bangkok could be better used elsewhere, Thaksin apparently came to the conclusion that he would be better off scrapping the demonstration entirely. Other factors in his decision may have been fears that fewer protesters than anticipated would attend the rally, as well as Thaksin's eye on court deliberations in his asset forfeiture case, with a decision expected in early January. End Summary and Comment.

REDS CALL FOR MASSIVE TURNOUT...

¶13. (C) In the wake of Thaksin's call to action in a late October phone-in to supporters in Thailand's northeast, red-shirt leaders launched weeks of preparations for a protracted rally they hoped might unseat the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva (REF B). In meetings with us starting in early November, red shirt leaders like Vira Musikapong had previewed their plans to hold a major rally in the early December timeframe, despite our observation that the timing would conflict with the King's birthday celebration, particularly the annual December 2 military parade which takes place in the same area of Bangkok used for the colored political rallies. Public red-shirt predictions that one million Thais would join the UDD protest were obviously overblown; private predictions were also predictably overheated, with core red-shirt leader Jaran Ditapichai claiming to us on November 24 -- before Thaksin's call for withdrawal of the event -- that 300,000 people would be participating in the protest (note: compared to 100-120,000 in April. End note). Bangkok's newspapers published police/intelligence service estimates of 40-45,000 likely participants.

...BUT BACK DOWN AT THE NEXT-TO-LAST MINUTE

¶14. (C) Leaving little doubt who calls the shots for the red-shirt movement, Thaksin called UDD leaders on November 24 and urged them to reconsider holding the protest, citing the conflict with the King's birthday celebration. UDD leaders then met on November 25 to discuss Thaksin's recommendation and predictably opted to stand down. Given the weeks of

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planning, the most likely explanation for the cancellation is a cold, hard cost-benefit analysis by Thaksin - how much a rally would cost him financially in the short term (in terms of bankrolling transportation and living expenses for upcountry protesters) and perhaps in the mid-term (arguments in his asset forfeiture case wrap up November 26, with a verdict expected in January), as well as politically (Puea Thai leader Yongyuth Wichaidit told us November 25 that a majority of PT MPs were against the rally given the timing around the King's birthday).

¶15. (C) Anuporn Kashemsant, an official with the office of the King's Private Principal Secretary, on November 25 dismissed the "good intention" rationale and suggested a more tactical consideration: the rally would not have attracted the large numbers red shirts wanted, because insufficient numbers of up-country farmers were taking offers to decamp to Bangkok. Even Thaksin's lieutenants freely admitted to us that, with the Abhisit administration on increasingly solid footing, it appeared highly unlikely the demonstration could have achieved its stated goal of toppling the government (REF A-B).

CITY-WIDE ISA AND FEARS OF APRIL RIOTS REDUX

¶16. (C) Prior to the red-shirt cancellation of the planned rally, the Thai Cabinet on November 24 announced it had approved the imposition of the ISA for all of Bangkok from November 28 through December 14. The decision was based on reports that the red-shirts planned to spread throughout the city in a so-called "star-cluster" strategy, including plans to target the houses of Privy Council Chair Prem and PM Abhisit. UDD core leader Jaran claimed to us that this was not actually part of the red-shirts' strategy; their goal had been to have as many people together as possible.

¶17. (C) Putting aside red-shirt leader private assurances that the planned demonstration would be peaceful and non-violent, red rhetoric had been heating up in recent weeks in ways that

were disturbingly reminiscent of the rhetorical ramp-up in March leading into the April red violence (ref C). This included language used by Thaksin in his tweets, claims by red-shirt leaders like Jatuporn that the demonstration would continue until the government was overthrown, the reappearance in media messaging of red violence practitioner MGEN Khattiya (aka "Seh Daeng") and fugitive red leader Jakrapob Penkair (who called for armed rebellion in April prior to fleeing to Cambodia), and worst of all, red radio incitement for Abhisit's death by Chiang Mai red leader Phechawat on November 19.

¶8. (C) Human Rights Watch researcher Sunai Phasuk and independent photojournalist Nick Nostitz, who only semi-jokes about having been "embedded" in red circles for several years, separately shared concerns with us that the red-shirts were operating under the assumption the planned demonstration would turn violent. Nostitz cited the rhetoric in particular of Pattaya riot leader Arisman and Suphon Attawong (aka "Rambo Isaan"). Thaksin's ex-lawyer, his sister Yingluck Shinawatra, and Jaran all told us that the UDD planned for the rally to be peaceful. However, red-shirt leaders offered similar assurances to us in March-April, and Jaran said he could not discount the possibility of a third party inciting the government to crack down, at which point he said the UDD leaders would not be able to contain the actions of the people. We will continue to monitor red rhetoric and developments closely.

JOHN